

<i>Mermaids</i> on Animal Planet: What's Myth? What's Real?

Maybe we're asking the wrong question by just focusing on whether these haunting CGI merpeople are real or myth. The real question is: Why are we making our oceans too dangerous to sustain all life?



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Sep 2005, Megaptera novaeangliae.

When Animal Planet's "mockumentary" mega-hit, [Mermaids: The Body Found](#) aired last spring, 32 million people tuned in. So many people demanded: "Are mermaids real?" that NOAA had to issue an [official disclaimer](#) denying their existence. This weekend's Monster Week sequel: *Mermaids: The New Evidence*, will probably make the same splash, or televised tsunami.

Mermaids: The Body Found, begins with a horrific mass stranding of whales and dolphins off [Washington state](#). The film's focus is on the discovery of another beached "body" that appears half-human, half-merperson -- a body that is "disappeared" and covered up by the Navy. Who knows if that mermaid discovery is factual? Or if the show's fascinating glimpse into [Aquatic Ape Theory](#), now gaining prominence in evolutionary science, is true. What we know is real about the Animal Planet show, is that all over the world, military sonar is actually killing all species of whales [in rising numbers](#).

And the U.S. Navy has just been given [permission](#) by our government to deafen, harass, and "take" (kill) thousands more--if we don't [limit them](#).

Maybe we're asking the wrong question by just focusing on whether these haunting CGI merpeople are real or myth. The real question is: Why are we making our oceans too dangerous to sustain all life? That's the message of the Animal Planet mermaid series. We don't seem to pay much attention when our whales and dolphins are beaching on our shores because of the lethal military sonar. But we really tune in when half-human sea creatures, so

much like us, are also dying.

["Rolling walls of noise,"](#) is what *Scientific American* calls military sonar. These high-intensity sound vibrations now being tested above [230 Decibels](#), are so horrifically loud and traumatic, they can rupture living tissues, causing ear bones to shatter and brains to hemorrhage. Cetaceans try to escape this sonic trauma by rising too quickly to the surface. They die of "the bends."

As a *National Geographic* author who since 1998 has written about the U.S. Navy's [all-out acoustic](#) war on the world's oceans and its creatures, I applaud Animal Planet for exposing the facts behind what noted whale researcher, Ken Balcomb, calls this ["acoustic holocaust."](#) Perhaps this sequel will urge people to action and to ask more questions: Why do we

continue to allow the Navy to blast its lethal sonar tests and destroy the very oceans they are supposed to protect? Why not set some [common-sense limits](#) on their testing, especially along whale migration routes and in marine sanctuaries, which nurse the next generations?

When most major medias, including [The New York Times](#) and [The Guardian](#), echo the Humane Society, Earth Justice, and [Natural Resources Defense Council](#), all protesting the violence of what the military calls this "collateral damage" in our oceans, it's time to pay attention. Unlike all the documentaries and articles on military sonar's devastation, it may well take this popular and entertaining Animal Planet show to educate the wider public about what's happening

underwater, "out of sight and out of our minds."

We love stories perhaps more than facts on file. Stories move us to change. That's why after documenting this military sonar as a journalist for many years, I turned to fiction to tell the human drama behind this real story. In my Sierra Club novel, [Animal Heart](#), I portrayed humans as they rise up and try to stop military sonar tests. These grassroots activists help save sea our marine mammal cousins whose fates are inevitably linked to ours.

Finally, realizing that until we dive into the oceans in our full imaginations, we won't realize how much our seas mean to our next generations, I wrote my own mermaid YA series, [The Drowning World](#). All these years of studying whales and dolphins inspired me to portray what it might be like to actually [shape-shift between species](#); half-human and half-dolphin. The power of a tail fluke instead of land legs; the rapid-fire communication, the keen echolocation to scan through skin and acoustically "see" inside other people, like ultrasound -- these are the dolphins' real skills. These abilities are so sophisticated, they seem like magic to us. And like dolphins, who spent three-quarters of their lives [at play](#), my merpeople also know how to explore and to have fun -- even when they are strangers surviving in a strange land.

Myths live on in our imaginations because they embody some truth about being human. They teach us how to survive. Stories are our first skill set when we play and listen and learn how to adapt. Stories teach our children how to grow up in a shifting world. Because our world really is drowning now with climate change and rising seas, mermaids are here again to show us how to survive our amphibious futures.

Here's what my mermaid, Marina, understands as she struggles to survive a future Florida that is sinking and ravaged by Flood Lands: *All worlds are connected. What affects one world, affects all others.* Marina's human mother tells her, this world is both "beautiful and dangerous." Humans always break Marina's heart, though she falls in love with us and risks everything to teach us how to shift.

Mermaids are mirrors reflecting back to us our ancient bond with the oceans and our future dependence upon the "gifts of the sea". Perhaps mermaids are beaching themselves on our shores, along with all the other very real whales and dolphins. Mermaids call forth from us a kinship and memory based on our own our Aquatic ape ancestors. Most of all, they remind us that our seas are our ancestral wombs and our most vital future life support system. The way marine mammals and mermaids sink or swim -- so do we.